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ABSTRACT

This paper singles out a novel written for children about India, "Chandra" (1995) by Frances Mary Hendry, as a powerful and useful novel to present to today's 11 to 14 year old students. The paper contends that the novel allows students to explore and consider different value systems, challenges them to become aware of prejudice and the making of assumptions and, particularly, to consider some specific issues faced by some Indian girls and oppression experienced by vulnerable groups. The paper first defines romanticism and reality as a cultural practice. It examines the issue of romanticism or reality through the following: (1) the tensions between tradition and modernity; (2) issues of patriarchy; (3) child marriage and abuse of wives; (4) widow slavery; (5) issues of dowry; (6) female health; and (7) education opportunities and neglect and abuse of the girl child. Throughout the paper a question is posed: What is the nature of reading as cultural practice? It is argued that as a reader, a person can step outside of his/her ideology by: having substantial experience in the field in question; seeking expert mediators within a culture both as writer and reader; and seeking supporting evidence, especially from within the culture. The paper finds that in this way, the question of romance versus realism can be resolved, though findings may need to be expressed in conditional ways. It concludes that the challenge for a teacher is: to debate with students the issues of equality and personhood; to assist them to understand and possibly resist the dominant positioning of the text; and to consider the plight of young people who suffer oppression anywhere, anytime. (Contains 28 references. An appendix presents 2 tables of data.) (NKA)

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by Jilaine Johnson

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Romanticism or Reality?

An exploration of Frances Mary Hendry's *Chandra*

India! A fascinating land. My memories. Images of the magnificent Himalayan mountains, of a palace on a lake, mausoleums, the Taj Mahal by moonlight, temples, festivals, palm trees and beaches, rice fields, deserts, monsoons, bullock-drawn carts, densely-populated cities with sacred cows roaming freely , rickshaw wallahs, taxis, trucks, busy roads, crowded Calcutta buses with people dangling outside striving for a hand-hold, packed trains with their roof top travellers, the aromas, continuous noise and the heat and dust all vividly spring to mind when I read anything about India. Unforgettable experiences.

The settings of *Kim*, (Kipling, 1901) the intriguing world of the Grand Trunk Road, the bazaars, the processions, the villages and the wandering holy men or *saddhus* were what grabbed my attention as a child and eventually propelled me, for a period of three years, to live and teach there.

There are three novels especially written for children which resonate strongly for me; *Shanta* (Thøger, 1961), *The Village by the Sea* (Desai, 1982) and *Chandra* (Hendry, 1995). Both Thøger's and Desai's novels are set in villages, one, a backdrop setting on the edge of the jungle near a river, and the other based on the fishing village of Thul - a specific place where the community faced the challenges depicted. While I perceive the books to be accurate representations of the lives and settings portrayed within, I regard, from an educationalist's perspective, *Chandra* as the most powerful and useful novel to present to today's 11 to 14 year old students. Why? Because the novel allows students to explore and consider different values systems, challenges them to become aware of prejudice and the making of assumptions and, in particular, to consider some specific issues faced by some Indian girls and oppression experienced by vulnerable groups. It allows students the opportunity "to walk in someone else's shoes" albeit through a western cultural lens and to question the nature of the practice of oppression. This raises the issue which is problematic in *Chandra*; reading as cultural practice. This will be discussed shortly.

It is appropriate at this point to give definitions of *romanticism* and *reality* as used in this paper. Rather than delving into the history of literary critical meanings, particularly the term *romantic*, I wish to wear the educationalist hat and use the more generally accepted everyday connotation with which classroom students are likely to be familiar.

> romantic: 1. of, characterised by or suggestive of an idealised, sentimental or fantastic view of reality
> romanticise: 1a. make or render romantic or unreal
> 1b. describe or portray in a romantic fashion
> real: 1. actually existing or occurring in fact
> realistic: 2. based on facts rather than ideals
>
> Concise Oxford. (9th ed.). 1995.

What particular aspects within Hendry's novel keep students riveted, engaged in discourse and debate, and make the whole experience of the book so memorable? Has Hendry romanticised the situations portrayed within and made them appear far more fantastic than reality?

Is there a problem in defining romanticism and reality as a cultural practice? Is this novel positioning the readers to view events through a western cultural construct? Post structuralist critics could argue that the 'truth' about human nature as presented through the events and issues in *Chandra* is never an absolute truth. We tend to "interpret human action in the light of our own perceptions and the changing perceptions of society" (Saxby, 1997).

Sutherland, in *Hidden Persuaders: Political ideologies in literature for children* explains it thus:

> Like other types of literature, works written especially for children are informed and shaped by the authors' respective value systems, their notions of how the world *is* or *ought* to be. These values - reflecting a set of views and assumptions regarding such things as "human nature", social organisation and norms of behaviour, moral principles, questions of good and evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life - constitute author's ideologies. They may be idiosyncratic to the individual author, or may reflect and express the values of the culture at large, or of subgroups within the culture.
>
> Like other writers, authors of children's books are inescapably influenced by their views and assumptions when selecting what goes into the work (and what does not), when developing plot and character, determining the nature of conflicts and their resolutions, casting and depicting heroes and villains, evoking readers' emotional responses, eliciting readers' judgments, finding ways to illustrate their themes, and pointing morals. The books thus express their authors' personal ideologies (whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or indirectly). To publish books which express one's ideology is in essence to promulgate one's values.To promulgate one's values by sending a potentially influential book into public arenas already bristling with divergent, competing, and sometimes violently opposed ideologies is a political act. Seen in this light, the author's views *are* the author's politics; and the books expressing these views, when made accessible to the public, become purveyors of these politics, and potentially persuasive (Sutherland, pp. 143 - 144).

Ideology is a significant issue then for teachers who work with texts. Texts studied with classroom students present particular images or world views. Writers, by using their skill and through various strategies, can make those images gripping or pleasurable and thereby make the reader feel comfortable with that world or strongly opposed to it. This means that the student who does

not question that world view, accepts the world portrayed in the text as reality even if the text itself is romanticised. However, the student's construct of realism is not just dependent upon the text. What is realistic is not just the degree to which details in the text match the world, but also the degree to which the ideology of the text matches the reader's ideology.

Readers bring storytelling expectations as a cultural practice. For example, let us examine the "villain" as a stereotype. The father in this story, in the mind of a reader ignorant of thousands of years of traditional practice in a society where the social needs of the group take precedence over the rights of the individual, may be classified as a "villain" or "tyrant" and written off as "uncaring". Ghastly villains can be viewed as a romantic stereotype even though depicted events are potentially real.

Readers bring their cultural preferences and value systems in the reading act. While the perception of arranged child marriage may be viewed as a negative from western culture, from the perspective of some other cultures, early marriage is highly desirable. The girl-child's future has been secured and family duty and honour have been demonstrated. Because every person has a values system, it can be said of both the reader and the writer that no text "can be innocent of some ideological freight" (Hunt,1991).

Readers are constructed within a text to take up a positioning that shapes their idea of what is real or romantic. Because *Chandra* is written from a limited omniscient position this may be problematic for some readers who strongly sympathise with the protagonist. Some voices are not heard. Chandra's mother is marginalized. Although we may sense her anguish at widow-slavery as a life for her daughter, her real views are not expressed. Chandra's father, with tradition as the all-important pillar of his life, is also marginalized. The inner turmoil which drives him to bitter outburst may not be understood by the reader who classifies him 'tyrant' or 'villain'. Readers who explore Chandra's world and her experiences and side with her as she struggles are positioned to view the events largely from one perspective - that of the protagonist. Other readers from Hindu or Muslim backgrounds would bring a wealth of knowledge of cultural history and could well resist the rendering and challenge the view presented while still being sympathetic to her plight. Had another voice - a sister's, a cousin's - been introduced and given a different view of Chandra's dilemma, her personality, decisions and actions, and the ramifications these had on people around her, the chances that more readers would get past the heroine/villain aspect and be challenged to think outside their "cultural square" would be heightened. It could be argued that the narrative strategy employed by the author constructs Chandra as a type - the archetype of the feminine victim.

Realism is a construction - whose reality is a difficult, persistent problem. Perhaps, in the end we are left with saying "I found this representation real." The value and significance the "I" brings to the text becomes the focus. While I have outlined what could be viewed as problematic with *Chandra*, based on experiences and knowledge gained from my times spent in India, I believe the

novel to be more realistic than romantic. The text makes sense to me and I recognise the conflicts and practices depicted as part of the diverse culture of the India I knew. Further, the reality of situations can be checked out by reference to authorities within the culture. Bringing personal experience and public research together, this paper argues that considerable determinancy can be given to the question - is *Chandra* romantic or real? Therefore, there are tensions in the use of the book as information for social studies, a literary approach where a teacher assists students to understand and possibly resist the ideological positioning inherent within the text, and the reader who selects the book to read for pleasure or leisure. Without prior knowledge of the validity of the issues or an external mediator to perhaps assist in the mediation of the text, assumptions based on the readers's own cultural heritage may be made. The text is therefore problematic.

This paper examines this issue of romanticism or reality through the following:

1. The tensions between tradition and modernity
2. Issues of patriarchy
    - 2.1 the traditional view
    - 2.2 abuse of males
    - 2.3 the progressive view
3. Child marriage and abuse of wives
4. Widow slavery
5. Issues of dowry
6. Female health
7. Education opportunities and neglect and abuse of the girl-child

1. The tensions between tradition and modernity

Traditions die hard. The conflict in *Chandra* is between traditional and modern or progressive beliefs and values within an extended family in New Delhi and Rajasthani relatives. How divisive and destructive these can be, especially for girls, is clearly portrayed. Winner of the Writer's Guild and Lancashire Book Awards, Hendry's novel has been noted for its realistic details in terms of setting and characterisation. The author spent two months gathering material while travelling around India by second class train or bus. Along the way she met hospitable people who not only gave of their time in conversations or opened their homes but shared stories of events. The happenings, described in the novel, are based on these true accounts. Hendry, wherever she went, hired, as a guide, some local person who could translate for her; for example - a professional guide in Bikaner, a rickshaw driver in Lucknow, a teacher in Manali and a truanting schoolboy in Varanasi. Through these guides Hendry gained access to a range of people whom one would almost certainly not meet if one travelled across India with the standard tourist group. Hendry's manuscript, when completed, was scrutinised for accuracy by some of the people she met while researching material. The author, therefore must have been aware of reading as cultural practice. She clearly sought expert "mediation" for her experience of the living text around her.

While in Jaisalmir, Hendry tells of meeting Manju, a 15 year old girl who, under the protection of her police inspector father, ran the Puja Hotel for women (Hendry, 2000). Manju described to Hendry the story of her aunt, whose life was, with the exception of the helpful grandmother, almost exactly that depicted in *Chandra*. The aunt sheltered in an ashram for several years and found work dubbing songs for starlets in the movie industry in Mumbai (Bombay).

Chandra is eleven years old and, on her maternal grandmother's insistence, attended an English medium school. Her mother's family are fairly well off, of good caste and could generally be described as part of Delhi's middle-class. Her father, a Rajput of high caste , was poorer but had prospects. It is revealed that Chandra's mother held a BA degree, but, as her husband was very traditional, once married, she gave up her job as a librarian (p.11) to remain at home. Her father, keen to have Chandra married before she became "flighty, like western girls" (p.4) agrees to a marriage with a second cousin's son from a farm near Jaisalmir in Rajasthan. The young man, Roop, is sixteen and training for a career within the hotel industry. He wishes a modern wife who will be able to assist him when, with the assistance of the dowry the arranged marriage will bring, he has bought a small hotel. By all accounts the arranged marriage looks as though it could be successful. Tragedy strikes when Chandra is sent to visit with her in-laws. Chandra is unaware that Roop has died of a fever and that her father, with no verbal protestations that we hear from her tradition-bound mother, is sending her away to become a child-widow slave. This is the traditional way. After a twenty hour bus journey, a five hour wait for some member of the family to collect her, and a three hour camel and cart journey out into the desert, Chandra learns that she is to be blamed for the death of her husband.

> Roop had lived, until he married her; it must be her fault. The traditionally-brought-up half of her accepted that, even while the educated half insisted that no, it wasn't true, she'd done nothing... (p.29)

Chandra is vilified and physically and verbally abused for ten days and then kept in purdah. Food and water are begrudgingly given. Alone, except for an elderly widow, abandoned by her family, Chandra almost goes mad.

How Chandra overcomes despair, turns to the goddess Durga for solace and advice, enlists the widow's assistance, escapes and reaches her grandmother's home makes compelling reading. (This escape could be viewed as romantic by a reader who had no knowledge of the number of young wives in India today, who actually do flee violent situations). There is, however, no happy ending for Chandra upon her return to Delhi. Her father, wishing to return her to the in-laws in the desert, is waiting outside her nani's apartment. When thwarted in this attempt to drag his daughter back into bondage by bystanders and his mother-in-law, he screams epithets and accusations at Chandra and publicly disowns her. In real life this is not unusual. There are many accounts of young brides being forced back to the violent situation from which they fled (Moore, 1995).Chandra shelters for several months with the family of a school friend but must be guarded as the adults are fully aware of the actions that the Rajasthani

family may take. The danger that she will eventually be caught, returned and probably killed is very real (p.46, p.73). The in-laws locate her place of shelter, watch for an unguarded moment while Chandra is at the market, and attempt to kidnap her. Only her bodyguard's call of "Muslims, carrying off a Hindu girl! Help! Muslims!" and the Hindu battle-cry "Ram Ram" (p.101) which starts a riot in the marketplace prevents Chandra's capture. As a permanent home with relatives within India is impossible Chandra is sent to live with an aunt in Glasgow. She has lost family, friends, her precious inheritance of ruby and gold jewellery, but has her life. For an Indian girl-child this is a situation which demands inner courage and determination.

2. Issues of patriarchy

2.1. the traditional view

Male attitudes and traditional views dominate and are shown to regulate many aspects of a woman's life.

According to Derne (1994) male dominance, particularly in north India, "is rooted in the gender division of labour." It has been stated (Reskin 1988 and Chafetz 1990 cited Derne, 1994) that "a gender division of labour is accompanied by a gender ideology that justifies it." Women's work is often restricted to that of the domestic environment. Even in the country in traditional areas it is generally only the lower caste women who are permitted to work in the fields.

> In India, an integral part of the gender division of labour is an ideology of appropriate female behaviour that emphasises modesty, obedience, self-sacrifice and attachment to the home.

The honour of the family is very important to north Indians and women's modesty is closely connected with this. The head of the family is in control over the family, including women's sexuality and marriage arrangements (Derne, 1994). From the times of Manu, approximately two thousand years ago, a culture of dependency has been promulgated. *A woman should be dependent on her father as a child, on her husband as an adult, on her son when she is old, a woman should never be independent ...* (Reddy, 1991). The husband is god and in traditional views the wife must be subject to her husband in every way. The husband's will and word is law. In the Rajasthan village depicted in *Chandra* the women never handle money, have their clothing purchased for them and obediently work all day. The elderly widow had not been out of the village for 30 years although, through listening to the men's radio, even she was aware of the changing world. Women must acquiesce to every custom, their feelings or desires unimportant. Men dominate.

The father-in-law in *Chandra* is outraged when the bewildered young widow protests at being kept in purdah and expresses interest in keeping on with education and eventually gaining employment.

> Why should you go to school?... Job? ...No woman of my family will

> ever shame me by going outside to be stared at by every man in town, or working as if her menfolk can't afford to keep her. And why should we pay school fees for you? You'll stay secluded in purdah, serve us. Follow custom. (p.32)

When her mother-in-law screams, "Too late for sati, even if she'd do it - no courage, modern girls! No tradition, no pride!" Chandra protests that sati (suttee), immolation on the husband's pyre, is against the law - her teachers had told the students about it (p.32). For this comment she is beaten and her father-in-law's response is typical of traditionalist views:

> ...In my own house, I am the law! No government can make a law that says right is wrong and wrong is right! If this Miss was your teacher, she had no business teaching you such evil ideas! You will do your duty, and obey me as custom says ... (p.33).

Where these traditional attitudes are still held they continue to prevent recognition of person hood for women in India today .

Sarin, (1998) reports:

> traditional customs, sex-role stereotyping, cultural prejudices and lack of resources are the biggest hurdles in fulfilling the goal of equality for both sexes. The ignorance of women of their own rights and scarcity of women in decision making posts and lack of strong political commitment are other hurdles.

2.2 abuse of males

Hendry has introduced balance into this novel in the character Bhawar who demonstrates that males may also be targeted for abuse. Bhawar, a tenant farmer lost everything when he stood for election to the village council against the powerful local zemindar (landlord). A corrupted election with thugs intimidating locals, false voting, raised rent, unavailability of loan money, unemployment and hunger followed. The death of his wife resulted in Bhawar burning his home and departing, with his four young sons for Delhi. Chandra, hearing this story and the recounts of corruption and injustice from other roof top train travellers was surprised that "even men were treated badly..." (p.63). Bhawar was a low-caste Megwal who, despite recognition of Chandra's female status and knowing she was a runaway from accepted custom, protected her from a thief's actions and escorted her to her grandmother. He is shown to be a kind, fair man concerned with the welfare of any child, male or female. Bhawar's concern is in stark contrast to that of Chandra's father who is not prepared to break tradition even for the well-being of his daughter.

2.3 The progressive male view

This is largely presented through Sunil Mukherjee who gives Chandra temporary refuge in his home. The family life depicted is warm with much

shared laughter and love openly expressed. The approval of Chandra's behaviour by this family helped her accept that she need not bear the guilt for disobedience to tradition nor the questioning of the rightness of some her father's actions. To hear another man question the old ways and espouse that women were to be respected as people, not as possessions (p.84) was enlightening for Chandra. A businessman willing, for a price, to smuggle Chandra into England was located by her maternal uncle . The businessman recognised that Chandra was "a good girl in a bad situation" (p.116) and risked his livelihood to get her to safety. In order that the young reader does not receive a biased representation of Indian men, the positive modern-minded male characters' thoughts and actions are very important to the novel. For the educationalist too, these depictions allow for a wide exploration of male values and can challenge generalisations and assumptions .

3. Child marriage and abuse of wives

Although the legal age for marriage within India is 18 for women and 21 for men, in many parts of the country this law is ignored. In *Chandra* mention, in general terms, is made of the numbers of students attending Chandra's school (roll 2000) who have already been married. It is not unusual to find girls who were married at six (p.4). Chandra was happy that her marriage to a modern-minded young man had been arranged by her father. She accepted it until the death of her husband. By marrying into a traditional family who lived out in the desert she was forced to suffer the same fate of many rural brides whose husbands die. Centuries old custom ruled. Hendry highlights a possible danger for those girls who marry young. While most cases of child marriage result in the daughter remaining with her family until the onset of puberty or to the age of fifteen or sixteen this is not always so. Sociologists have documented cases where groom's families, unwilling to wait for the years to pass, take girls as young as six or seven away and make them begin work as servants or field hands. Childhood has finished. (*Women's International Network News*, 1998).

The Sunday Times (May 7, 1995) reported:

> About 500 000 Indian children were married at similar ceremonies around the country at 2 AM on May 3, 1995, a time Hindu astrologers deemed particularly propitious... police rarely risk interfering in a Hindu tradition which dates back thousands of years. For parents in rural India it is considered shameful and degrading to have an unmarried daughter. (Source WINN, 1995)

In June, 1998, *Women's International Network News* reported on the state of child marriage in Rajasthan, a north-western state. The New York Times analysed this report for its May 11, 1998 issue. The report was concerned at the decades of research which found that

> child marriages contribute to virtually every social malaise. The problems include soaring birth rates, grinding poverty and malnutrition, high illiteracy and infant mortality and low life expectancy, especially among

rural women.

This report, conducted by the national Government in Rajasthan in 1993, gave results of a survey of 5000 women and revealed that 56 percent had married before they were 15. Three percent of these women were married before the age of 5 and another 14 percent before they were 10. Only 3 percent of those surveyed used some form of birth control (other than sterilisation) and barely 18 percent were literate. The result - poor health and large families. The survey reported that out of 1000 births there were 73 infant deaths but by the time the children were five the figure had grown to 103. The severely undernourished rate for children under four years was 63 percent. Average life expectancy was 58 for women. It was stated that "in every case the figures were amongst the worst in India."

> ...The plight of most Indian women can be described by three P's: Poor, Powerless and Pregnant. They live in abject poverty, have no social status and are generally illiterate. They are subject to violence due to their gender, emotional and physical battering, prostitution, rape, dowry deaths... (Sarin, 1998).

Banerjee (1999) presents evidence of changes in the marriage system. The changes include increases in the marriage age for women and the near universal adoption of dowry as a condition of marriage. In this research marriage indices for five states were taken from census figures of 1921 and 1981 - refer Table 1 and Table 2 (refer Appendix 1). These figures are only accurate in that they report the registered marriages. Registration of marriage is not mandatory and many marriages are today still not registered with the government. The five states selected were Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Bengal, all of which may be termed "northern" states where despite the increase in the mean age of marriage shown in the tables there is strong evidence that child-marriage continues to flourish. Traditional views are still strongly held and the prevailing social taboos and beliefs on the status and role of women "inhibit literacy among women" (Reddy, 1991). These tend, in these states, to be the rural areas and villages away from major cities.

> It has been empirically established that women's education increases the age at marriage ... creates a stronger desire for family planning and promotes female employment. An educated woman can better combat the evils of the dowry system, avoid early and unequal marriages and supplement the family's income... (Reddy, p.1)

4. Widow slavery

Widow slavery is illegal in India but does not appear to be reported in the media as often as other dowry-related abuses. It takes a strong woman who finds herself in this situation, to fight the cultural practice. Widow slavery often involves semi-starvation, beatings and other forms of physical violence, enforced labour and an extended period of purdah for the woman concerned. The most tragic is

the fate of child brides who suddenly find themselves widowed. Traditionally, widows in some castes are expected to dress in a white and never remarry, this despite legislation through a Bill in 1856 which aimed to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows (Sarkar, 1997). Widows become the least valued female in the extended family. The outlook for Chandra, as a child-widow in this tradition-bound household is not good. Widows are deemed "unlucky, accursed" (p.31). Isolation, due to the belief that she has the evil eye - "the bad woman in the hut" (p.33 -35) and had caused her husband's death, sets Chandra apart from all except the elderly widow who had herself suffered. The mental torment and emotional suffering inflicted by this practice upon a young girl is recognised within the Indian government as abuse. Unfortunately, many victims are unable to escape and do not know where to go for assistance, nor are they cognizant of their legal position.

Hendry does portray another perspective to balance this story. Chandra's progressive grandmother, a widow, is depicted as having respect from the family, as well as being permitted her independence and control of personal and financial affairs. The altercation between bystanders, Chandra's father and his mother-in-law which takes place outside the grandmother's flat is illuminating as to the gulf which exists between those who feel bound by rigid tradition and those who hold progressive views within a changing world. The grandmother did not hesitate to face her son-in-law with the illegality of his actions regarding widow slavery and her insistence that Chandra had a right to herself ensured temporary safety for her granddaughter. This insistence that Chandra has a right to her name; that she is not a series of "roles" with different labels permits the girl-child to see herself as a person in her own right.

5. Issues of dowry

The issue of providing dowry for girls does not dominate the novel but the ideas behind the dowry system affect how girls are treated. In Chandra's case dowry had been agreed but would not be given until the formal and permanent move to her husband which would occur at the end of her schooling. The dowry received by each of her brothers would be used to bolster hers. There is also mention of dowry insurance. The fact that dowry was seen by all as a burden and a huge drain on a family's financial status was made clear. An interesting point, in Chandra's case is made about inherited ruby and gold jewellery. It was not part of the dowry and was specifically hers. When she escapes Chandra has no qualms about taking back what is hers but is aware of the dangers to her physical self should she be caught. This threat of serious violence or even death within the text has not been exaggerated. It is, for some young women, an acknowledged risk.

More than 5800 women are killed by their in-laws each year and, it is claimed, only a tiny percentage of the killers ever receive punishment (Pratap, 1995)). Sarkar (1997) claims that "law, justice and the police remain deeply implicated in the most unambiguous forms of patriarchal controls". The conviction rate, in 1995 for offenders was less than one percent (Pratap). The risk of receiving

punishment if charged is therefore small. In 1987, figures for registered dowry deaths were released in Parliament. According to police reports dowry deaths have increased 170 percent in the last decade (Moore,1995). In 1985 they numbered 999, in 1986 - 1319, and in 1987 - 1786 (Bumiller, 1990).

Young brides and widows do escape when they are mistreated and fear for their lives. As depicted in *Chandra* however, many girls face more difficulties. Often the parents because of social custom, the shame or family honour, refuse to take them back. There are an estimated 150 homes and shelters in Delhi which have been specifically opened for tortured and abused women. The Women's Vigilance Society "specialise in helping families negotiate the corrupt and often inept police and judicial systems" (Moore, 1995).

6. Female health

Many women do not control their own daily consumption of food. Social custom dictates that the men of the family eat first, taking the largest share. Women and girls usually eat the left-overs. Adolescent girls may have their food consumption restricted and may have to observe a series of religious fasts from childhood (*Women's International Network News*, 1991). Women's health is linked with socio-economic status, education and access to medical personnel. Sarin (1998) states that: "at least 50% of all women of all age groups suffer from anaemia and malnutrition..." Research in women's health from World Bank reports has shown that the male child receives more medical attention and that more girls under five years old, die. In 1992-93 more boys than girls were vaccinated and treated. This practice of health "discrimination continues into women's adult lives" (*Women's International Network News*, 1997).

Chandra, while in the care of her family in Delhi, appeared to be healthy and well fed. Her family certainly had sufficient for their needs and paisa was available for Chandra to purchase snacks from street sellers. Chandra's intake of food was restricted by her in-laws. The farm had an abundance of food but, due to her low status, scraps were Chandra's share. It was only because of the extra pieces of food surreptitiously given by the elder widow, Padma, that Chandra's physical state of health was not seriously compromised. Had Chandra remained, her life would have been one of servitude and possibly continued serious abuse.

7. Education opportunities and neglect and abuse of the girl-child

The value of education for girls is demonstrated in *Chandra*. Her teachers have presented the legal rights and encouraged students to think for themselves. The educational experiences of school and the knowledge this brought, along with her expressions to the goddess Durga, give strength to Chandra's desire to break tradition, escape and try to continue her life. In many rural areas and urban slums it is the sons who are permitted to receive formal schooling while daughters are often kept at home. The Indian government has had a policy of eight years free and compulsory education since 1947 but in practice, unless the head of the family is not tightly tradition-bound and values schooling for all, in

some villages there will be few female students. An estimated 35 million children receive no education at all. Even within cities where daughters of traditional families may be permitted to attend school for a period of time, rigid control and keeping the girl-child dependent has high priority (Derne,1994) while daughters of slum dwellers are probably out working, either rag picking, begging or in some factory as part of India's estimated 100 million child labour force (UNICEF, 1995). Chandra's education, while paid for by her grandmother, is deemed by the great-aunt arranging the marriage as "a waste of time and money for a girl to learn geography-history, just to run her husband's home and rear his children" (pp. 3-4). This is an all too familiar comment. Many of the reports strongly advocate improved literacy for women as the "critical factor in influencing the social welfare and planning programmes" (Reddy, 1991).

Aspects of caring for females and the failing or the unwanted girl-child are highlighted in *Chandra*. Girls are often regarded as a burden and a curse. The traditional felicitations for a marriage *"May you be the mother of a hundred sons"* represents, in many cases, the dominant attitude. While Chandra's father does make certain that family honour is upheld with the wedding celebration arrangements, Chandra is made to feel guilt for her state of being. "Always more rupees - girls are truly a curse" (p.14). When widowed, Chandra is another burden for the family to carry. Padma, the elder widow who becomes a surrogate mother to Chandra, reveals why her one year old daughter died. Her father-in-law would not let a man take time from harvesting to drive her into the closest town to the doctor, and would not have given the rupees to pay for the service and medicines anyway. Although the other women assisted Padma in nursing her daughter the accepted social norm "she was only a girl. And she'd need a dowry later" (p.39) was hanging overhead. Female children, where this attitude of "only a girl" remains ingrained, are far more likely to suffer severe neglect leading to death. Rajana Kumari, director of the New Delhi-based Centre for Social Research states " from the time she is conceived, every step of the way can be lethal for a woman" (Pratap, 1995).

Three months of every year that I lived in India was spent in travel and people watching. Villages, country towns and cities were visited and seen from the perspective of a 'wanderer' rather than a 'tourist'. Accommodation was either a small guest house (usually without power) or spartan backpacker type in the not-so-upmarket suburbs or inner city back streets. I saw a village medical clinic in action, heard medical workers speak of the difficulties of treating women and girls and spent two weeks on a leprosarium in Bihar. The settings which Hendry portrays of crowded streets, bazaars with their complex alleys of vendors, wandering animals, the transport systems, the train journeys and sanitation facilities (or lack thereof) at stations are depicted accurately. City scenes from the films *City of Joy* or *Salaam Bombay* do not romanticise urban India and nor does Hendry in *Chandra*. Descriptions of the countryside are also accurate. Having travelled for three day journeys by train in crowded third class carriages with other passengers travelling on top of the train itself, and having completed lengthy trips by packed open-air bus, I know these depictions have not been exaggerated. The countryside, its villages with walled houses and open water

pumps, village square and carts pulled by buffaloes, oxen or camels are likewise familiar to any traveller to India.

Impressive also, to one who has lived in India for three years, is the way Hendry used language to depict sounds, to capture the essence of conversations and almost the rhythmic lilt of the voice. Common Hindi terms were used, and for students, the glossary is informative.

> She's marvellous, so...so motherly! She's huge, and her husband is small - like an elephant and a monkey! Ai-ai, ...(p79)

> - but you've changed so much, you're so skinny-craggy! Ai, what a terrible thing, I said you were too young - hai, I'm so excited, I'm talking as much as Sangeeta! (p.80)

Throughout this paper I have posed the question - what is the nature of reading as cultural practice? I have argued that, as a reader, it is possible to step outside one's ideology by:
1. having substantial experience in the field in question;
2. seeking expert mediators within a culture both as writer and reader;
3. seeking supporting evidence, especially from within the culture.
In this way, the question of romance versus realism can be resolved though there may well be a need to express findings in conditional ways.

Hendry has portrayed a world in which there is trial and tribulation for the protagonist. Despite the seriousness of the issues inherent in this story, through the development of characters and their actions the reader is left with a sense of hope for Chandra's future. The events have not been over-exaggerated, sensationalised nor romanticised. The challenge for a teacher is to debate with students the issues of equality and personhood, to assist them to understand and possibly resist the dominant positioning of the text and to consider the plight of young people who suffer oppression anywhere, anytime. For me, *Chandra* is not a romantic story but a reminder of what today is still reality for a significant group of young Indian women.

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Appendix 1:

Table 1: Marriage indices for Five States in 1921

Legend:
A = State
B = Mean age at Marriage (women - singulate mean age calculated up to 35 years of age)
C = Proportions of Married girls Ages 0 to 9
D = Proportions of Married girls Ages 10 to 14
E = Sex Ratio (15 - 40 years) - (men per 100 women)
F = Proportion of Widowed Women (15 - 40 years)
G = Proportion of Never-Married Men (older than 40 years)

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Karnataka	14.47	.05	.33	103	.16	.04
Maharashtra	12.28	.12	.64	100	.14	.03
Uttar Pradesh	12.89	.06	.51	113	.11	.06
Punjab	15.01	.02	.24	133	.07	.09
Bengal	12.83	.05	.59	106	.20	.02

Source: Indices calculated from various volumes of the Census of India (1921).

Table 2: Marriage indices for Five States in 1981

Legend:
A = State
B = Mean age at Marriage (women - singulate mean age calculated up to 34 years of age)
C = Proportions of Married girls Ages 0 to 9
D = Proportions of Married girls Ages 10 to 14
E = Sex Ratio (15 - 40 years) - (men per 100 women)
F = Proportion of Widowed Women (15 - 40 years)
G = Proportion of Never-Married Men (older than 40 years)

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Karnataka	19.11	NA	.04	103	.02	.02
Maharashtra	18.73	NA	.03	108	.03	.01
Uttar Pradesh	17.22	NA	.11	110	.00 [c]	.03
Punjab	21.00	NA	.01	112	.01	.06
Bengal	18.97	NA	.02	112	.02	.03

Source: Indices calculated from various volumes of the Census of India (1981).

NOTE: NA = not applicable. Marital status of children younger than 9 years was not provided in the Census of 1981 due to the small number of cases

[c] Connotes less than 1% of the age group

Tables reproduced from Banerjee (1999).